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ABSTRACT

A study sought to identify and verify the characteristics of rural settings and teachers that, in the literature, are related to success in rural teaching of students with handicapping conditions and to compare college faculty expectations and attitudes with those of local education administrators and master teachers. A survey was conducted by mail questionnaire of rural local administrators (n=29) from upper state New York and college faculty (n=30) from an Albany private college. The survey contained 5 open-ended questions asking for characteristics which impact rural educational services to the handicapped and 20 attitude items. Comparisons made between rural educators and college faculty revealed differences in 8 of the 20 attitude items. Regarding the handicapped, more rural educators than college faculty were concerned about financial ramifications of providing services, had lower academic expectations, and had confidence in vocational education. More college faculty than rural educators expected non-teaching staff to be prepared to work with the handicapped. Results document a knowledge and attitude gap between rural educators and college faculty who train teachers and a lack of awareness of issues research considers important. Teacher training programs must be improved and based upon needs of rural settings. Following the narration are tables displaying questionnaire results, and a copy of the questionnaire. (PM)

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How Far is the Ivory Tower From Reality in Preparing Teachers for Rural Settings?*

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Running Head: IVORY TOWER

Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association in Chicago, Illinois, 1985.

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Abstract

Equal numbers of rural administrators and college education faculty were surveyed by questionnaire on attitude toward delivering educational services to the handicapped and on issues identified in the literature as impacting on rural education. Results compared responses of rural educators and college faculty and responses of both to issues highlighted in the literature. Differences on attitude between the two groups were found in financial, academic expectations, and vocational training statements. On issues impacting on rural education, more rural educators were aware than college faculty, but neither group demonstrated a level of awareness necessary to improve pre or inservice teacher training.

How Far is the Ivory Tower From Reality In Preparing Teachers for Rural Settings?

The objectives of this study were to identify and verify the characteristics of rural settings and teachers that, in the literature, are related to success in rural teaching of students with handicapping conditions and to compare college education faculty expectations and attitudes with those of local education administrators and master teachers. (The college currently has a federal grant to improve its preservice program such that its graduates will be better prepared to serve handicapped learners in rural settings.)

There is a current strong call to improve the preservice training of those who will teach in rural settings (3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 14). While most teacher education programs are responding to the trend to specialize, rural educators continue to need to be generalists (2, 5, 6). They must be prepared to work across more disciplines, more age levels, more handicapping conditions than their counterparts in urban/suburban settings. They must have interpersonal skills and intrapersonal qualities that will support prolonged geographic, cultural and professional isolation (3, 5). They must know how to access resources, retain professional ties and maintain a positive self-image (1, 5, 11, 12).

How aware of these characteristics are local educational administrators and college faculty?

Method

A review of the literature was conducted to identify the characteristics of rural settings and of teachers that impact on successful delivery of

services to learners in rural settings. Then rural local education administrators (n=29) and college education faculty (n=30) were surveyed by mail questionnaires. This represented a return rate of 39% for the rural respondents and 74% for the college faculty. The administrators were Chief School Officers, guidance counselors, principals and department heads from 15 rural school districts in upper New York State. The college faculty were full and part-time professional educators who teach at a private college in Albany, New York with a strong education program in both elementary education and special education.

The questionnaire contained 5 open-ended questions, 4 of which are of concern for this paper. These requested the respondents to list the characteristics of rural life, school patterns, resources and teacher characteristics that potentially impact on services to the handicapped in rural areas. The questionnaire also contained a 20 item attitude questionnaire (developed and validated in a prior study: Grippin, 4 related to services for the handicapped in educational settings.

Results

Results were collated and comparisons made between rural educators and college faculty and both groups of educators to the current literature. In terms of the attitude items, 8 of the 20 items revealed differences between the rural educators and college faculty. More rural educators than college faculty are concerned about the financial ramifications of providing educational services to the handicapped (69% vs. 52%), have lower academic expectations for the handicapped (28% vs. 43%), and have confidence in vocational education for the handicapped (69% vs. 45%). More college

faculty than rural educators expect non-teaching staff to be prepared to work with the handicapped (72% vs. 59%). Most rural educators express doubt in the use of standardized tests to evaluate academic progress of handicapped learners (80% vs. 41%). (New York State has special regulations for administering state mandated evaluation instruments to special needs populations.)

Tables 1 through 4 contain the comparison of rural educators and college faculty to four of the open-ended questions on the questionnaire. (The other question is not relevant to this study.) Responses have been categorized in terms of issues identified in the rural education literature. Categorizing in this way permitted all responses to be included. The tables reveal a low awareness of the issues on the part of both rural educators and college faculty.

Table 1 presents the percentage of rural educators and college faculty identifying characteristics of rural life that limit educational services to the handicapped, categorized by issues identified in the rural education literature. Except for 69% of the rural educators identifying transportation difficulties and 48% of the college faculty identifying low incidence of handicapped, issues discussed in the literature were listed by few participants.

Place Table 1 about here

Table 2 displays the percentage of rural educators and college faculty identifying aspects of rural life that contribute to better educational services for the handicapped, categorized by issues identified in the literature.

More rural educators than college faculty are aware of the benefits of the close interpersonal relationships fostered in a rural setting.

Place Table 2 about here

Table 3 lists the percentage of rural educators and college faculty identifying organizational issues which impact on rural education in ways not found in urban/suburban settings. As with the other issues, there is not a large percentage of participants labelling the issues found in the literature.

Place Table 3 about here

Table 4 reports the percentage of rural educators and college faculty identifying characteristics of successful rural teachers, categorized by issues identified in the literature. Very few participants identified such characteristics and 10% of each group indicated that they saw no differences between the characteristics of successful rural and urban/suburban teachers.

Place Table 4 about here

Discussion

The results document a knowledge and attitude gap between rural educators and college faculty who train teachers. They further document lack of awareness of pertinent issues identified in the research literature

on rural education and preservice needs. Rural educators are more aware of the special characteristics needed in rural areas than college faculty who train teachers. Neither group, however, is able to articulate with any specificity the characteristics noted in the research literature as having a major impact on educational delivery in rural settings.

There are two possible ways to interpret these findings: either the rural education literature is not applicable to the rural settings surveyed in this study or the respondents to the survey are insulated from consciousness of these issues. Since the two major studies of rural education, (7, 13), are national in scope, it seems reasonable to assume that they generalize to schools in New York State. Therefore, the more reasonable interpretation is that the rural educators and college faculty are relatively unaware of the major issues that impact upon delivery of educational services in rural areas.

The knowledge and attitude gap between the rural educators and the college faculty surveyed reflects the larger picture. Nelson (14) found that only 3 out of 41 surveyed colleges and universities offered training programs for rural teaching and only 17 of 41 offered components in their teacher training programs related to teaching in rural areas. On the other side, numerous articles and studies reflect the insulation of rural educators from scholarly research and college/university ties. For example, Schmidt (15) calls for improved staff development in rural schools without once mentioning higher education. A large number of studies (for example: 3, 6, 12) report results of surveying rural educators on topics of teacher preparation without validating those results against needs

identified in larger, more carefully controlled studies (7, 13).

While it is important to recognize the individuality of rural districts, continuing to generate isolated descriptive studies that are not related to a larger body of research and literature seems counter-productive. Improved teacher training programs must be grounded on more than personal opinion about what is needed. As the current study demonstrates, rural educators do not always know what is unique about rural education. This is especially so if the rural educator has never experienced another educational environment. We would not expect urban educators to be the final word on teacher training for urban settings and we should not expect that improved teacher training for rural areas will be generated solely by assessing rural educators. The need for additional carefully controlled field studies in which rural educators and college faculty collaborate is sorely needed. Until such research is available, we will continue to read that only teachers who were educated in rural settings will succeed in rural settings (12). This is certainly an indictment of current teacher training programs.

A correlated problem is the lack of awareness on the part of rural educators that some impediments to success involve professional insulation on their part. For example, if they are not aware of the impact of community upon school in rural areas in comparison to urban/suburban areas, then they are unlikely to initiate staff development programs to improve teacher skills in this context.

The areas of discrepancy highlighted by this study provide an impetus for planning staff development programs at both the college and rural

school level. The Ivory Tower needs to be brought closer to reality and rural school administrators need to be made more aware of the variables that impinge on the quality of instruction in their districts. Several models for improving teacher training for rural service are extant in the literature (1, 5, 8, 10, 11, 16). The next step would appear to be the careful consideration of these models by consortia of college/university and catchment rural schools, followed by controlled field studies. The theories of learning necessary to generate successful teacher training programs exist. The task is to use our professional knowledge to that end.

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Table 1

Characteristics of Rural Life That Limit Educational Services to the Handicapped

Comparison of Responses from Rural Educators and College Faculty Categorized by Issues in the Literature

ISSUE	Percentage Identifying Issue As Important: RURAL EDUCATORS	COLLEGE FACULTY
Inadequate financial resources	34	38
Transportation difficulties	69	38
Sparse population creating low incidence of handicapped	24	48
Lack of professional services	21	14
Lack of community-based, non-school resources	10	7
Rural populations demand less of government agencies	7	7
Isolation	28	7
Less qualified staff	0	10
Cultural and social limitations for students	17	0

Table 2

Characteristics of Rural Life That Contribute to Better Educational Services for the Handicapped

Comparison of Responses from Rural Educators and College Faculty Categorized by Issues in the Literature

	Percentage Identifying Issue As Important	
Issue	Rural Educators	College Faculty
Closer student-teacher relations	38	0
Closer school-community-family relations	41	24
Better class environment (e.g. discipline, individualized attention)	21	34
Less peer pressure	7	10

Table 3

Educational Organizational Issues That Impact on Delivery of Services to the Handicapped

Comparison of Responses from Rural Educators and College Faculty Categorized By Issues in the Literature

Issue	Percentage Identifying Issue As Important: Rural Educators	College Faculty
Administration of Special Education Programs one of many other jobs	34	24
Rapid staff turnover	3	0
Fewer levels of bureaucracy	10	3
Need for specialist to travel among schools	3	10

Table 4

Characteristics of the Successful Rural Teacher Not Needed by Other Teachers

Comparison of Responses from Rural Educators and College Faculty

Categorized by Issues in the Literature

	Percentage Identifying Issue As Important	
Issue	Rural Educators	College Faculty
Better communication skills	7	7
Awareness of rural sociology	10	31
Cross-categorical preparation	10	3
Ability to help students overcome rural social and cultural isolation	3	0
Ability to work in and with community	3	0
Responded that there were no differences between rural and urban/suburban	10	10

Table X

Comparison of Responses Between Rural Educators and College Faculty to Attitude Statements

Attitude Statement		%YES	%U*	%NO
1. Current financial conditions should be an important consideration in expanding services for students with handicapping conditions.	Rural Educators	69	7	24
	College Faculty	52	7	41
2. Teachers should require handicapped students to meet the same academic standards as non-handicapped students studying the same course material.	Rural Educators	28	14	58
	College Faculty	43	25	32
3. Students with special needs cannot compete with normal students in most education programs.	Rural Educators	37	10	52
	College Faculty	14	17	69
4. Handicapped students should be included in regular education programs even if they cannot benefit from standard instructional materials.	Rural Educators	34	17	48
	College Faculty	17	14	69
5. It is realistic to expect non-teaching staff, e.g. administrators, janitors, secretaries, counselors, to be prepared to handle the special needs of handicapped students.	Rural Educators	59	10	31
	College Faculty	72	14	14

(table continues)

Table X

Comparison of Responses Between Rural Educators and College Faculty to Attitude Statements

Attitude Statement		%YES	%U*	%NO
6. Vocational programs for the handicapped are a sham because they prepare students for jobs that do not exist.	Rural Educators	21	10	69
	College Faculty	21	34	45
7. Students with special needs can be evaluated by tests designed for school-wide administration, e.g. PEP, Regents.	Rural Educators	10	10	80
	College Faculty	27	31	43
8. Students with special needs should not be included in vocational programs which require the use of potentially dangerous machinery.	Rural Educators	0	17	80
	College Faculty	21	14	65

*Undecided